

Centuries of Ashes

The shard-like anger of Port-au-Prince
Will slice through social veins
And harvest life with a Machete.

Two centuries of ashes and blind privilege
Hoarding in palaces, suffusing fetidness
With extraneous air-freshners.

Two centuries of ashes and cruelty
Has been mastered with a surgeon's
Precision. We laugh as we bleed.

Despite drunken drums
And frolicsome hips,
Shard-like anger will rankle

And stream through peasant fields,
Shanty towns and regal abodes the way
Red ants march on pressed sugarcanes.

Despite drunken drums and frolicsome hips,
Drifting angels will wing themselves away
The way bats flock out of dark caves.

Patrick Sylvain
September 2005
Somerville, MA

Catacomb

Patrick Sylvain

Like china plates, my country is shattered, and millions
Of seagulls' cries rise from dust to break silence.
With one undulation and grinding of plates, lovers took
Their final embraces underneath slabs. We are burrowed,
Buried in buckled earth and decapitated in numbers.

Millions of seagulls' cries rise from dust to break silence.
Cracked lips, crushed chests, metallic birds survey
Concrete tombs, catacombs. Bare hands comb *decombe*
Like collectors. Bloodhounds, developing a mania,
Saving lives trapped. For a moment, the banality of class, gone.

With one undulation and grinding plates, the city of my birth
Became china plates with shards forming for miles and lives
Transforming into worms as metallic birds and rescuing hands
Favored Montana, an elite hotel. Class is back. I remounted
The horse of tears as polemics play on the tarmac.

Another house has fallen, this time my 51 year old cousin
Is consumed by concrete. Memories press against slabs
And bodies turn into leaves begging to be chronicled.
My grieving eyes are punctured by cascades of crushed limbs.
I ration memories to avoid gaps, saving his laughter for rainy days.

My umbilical cord is buried in the city of my birth, flattened.
My childhood memories play in quick frames, knowing my tongue
Will no longer taste communion. My Sacre-Coeur and Cathedral
Hosts crumbled to dust. Dust, a gathering of dust overtakes
The city into an eclipse and the cathedral saints become homeless.

I remember my mother, radiant, on her knees praying
At the National Cathedral. White sleeveless dress, black shoes,
Pressed hair, vigorously thanking the high-pedestaled Virgin
For her stamped passport. I was ten, and not yet aware,
But felt the weight of flapping wings, the migration of love.

Now, stitched with pain I watch a migration of loaded hunchbacks,
dusty hair and desolate eyes retaking the bare mountains
Hopes scattering like shards of china plates in heaps and rubbles
Of despair. The city of my birth is a catacomb, catapulted back
Through time as we are still recovering the dead.

The ghostly silence of not knowing, bruises the mind
of the living with rage, no obituary pages to flip,
To calm the thousand wailing mouths, and empty arms
Await a last embrace. Flames crackle inside tender heads
Trying to cage in nerves as tears lap cheeks.

The city of my birth is a catacomb and I pull words through fissures,
Honeycomb-like stanzas of fragmented lives to stitch poetry
So dusty eyes can witness a new dawn and form new memories.
Perhaps this is the aphasia of a feathery existence and the beginning
Of a friendly sun, a friendlier eagle and a new *L'ouverture*.

As a poet, haunted by transfixed gazes, bloodied faces and sooty hair,
I am also shattered and in need of a makeover. With shifting plates
Smashing my ribs, bitterly awaken by the taste of acrid tears,
I dump all excess weight in couplets, quatrains and metrical feet.
Prosodically, I count my own dead as I refuse the hemlock.

January 20, 2010

Ports of Sorrow

Patrick Sylvain

Early January afternoon, I stand in my own port of pain
Intertwined with my wife as we moan death-like an incision
To the core. Barbed notes in a soprano's throat.

Port-au-Prince has become an archipelago of open tombs
Consumed slowly by the sun and forming an ever lasting covenant.
This unrelenting port is a cup of their blood. May the sins
Of the prince be forgiven and forgive those who have trespassed
Against "the wretched of this earth."

The port of prince is a mausoleum of dirt-embroidered bodies,
A quarry of dried tongues begging for holy water and bread.
No bread was ever broken and the disciples feared the masses.

Port-au-Prince has neither port nor prince,
But satellites beam our misery as we line up,
Wounded, broken, seeking shelter anywhere but home.
There is no anchor for anger, and no anchor for despair.
The prince departed centuries ago with our coffer, leaving
Broken chariots and cobwebbed treasures.

The port of prince is a mausoleum of dirt-embroidered bodies,
I wake at night shuddering and intertwined with my wife
In our own port of pain. The clock does not stop at our will,
And how I wish to turn the hand of time, changing the prince's
Morbid cloak, but our ill-constructed port mimicked our timid steps
And breath. The departed last gulp of air is its breath, the relay of life.

Port-au-Prince has neither port nor prince,
As tempests incessantly sweep through,
1804's bright filament becomes faint and sad,
Dimming like a dying firefly. Life mocks us
With sadistic laughter. I feel burdened by death,
Losses and corpses swarming in my chest.
I need a stronger port to anchor their souls.

January 20, 2010

Marooning

They've set their dreams sailing
toward the windward passage.

One, two, three hundred
packed on rafters
clinging to their desires
to embrace the Eagle's
metallic freedom.

They, Toussaint's descendants,
once proud founders of freedom,
now maroon themselves
with the night sky,
trying to escape hawkish eyes.

They've sailed across the Atlantic,
riding currents.

Feet-damped, skull-baked.

They are once more children of salt.
Avoiding sharks and coast-guard cutters,
Cutting dreams.

They've set their dreams sailing
toward the windward passage,
their dark faces beaten by the sun,
and their blistered hopes marked by scarlet stains,
refusing to be consumed by the whirlwind
of lurking death, they continue
to navigate westward
in search of Juan Ponce de Leon's legends:
Florida's water and gold.

Once ashore, they've found neither the eternal
fountain of youth, nor riches. Instead,
some land at Chrome with their blistered hopes
locked-up, or are found lifeless on sandy beaches.
Their corpses disturbing fenced-Greenbacks' eyes.
Others slip their way
among Florida's downtrodden
until they are rescued by family members.
Their daubed lives, *Agwe*, the spirit of the sea,
spared on the waves of life's incision
where gluttonous poverty, like Atlantic sharks,
await with rows of festive teeth.

November 29, 1994

Cocoon of Poverty

For P. Laraque, N. Roc & in memory of J. Roche

Bullets pelt my swollen lids
As I watch a wounded nation
Writhe like a starved caterpillar.
Death angels patiently await
The terminal moaning of the weeping mountains,
As prostitute-politicians bootlick Atlantic States
With self-serving cupped hands.
My mouth is a rain-gutter.

In the center of my chest,
Where the rain has flooded,
Muffled words crowd my breast
Like caged doves cooing their unmet desires.
Clouds roam in this mortal corpus,
So poetry will cease to weep for a dying nation.

We were burnt by molasses and the tropic's cancer
When green eyes, gluttonous for coffee and cacao,
Brought the mountains to our backs.
We have become backward & destitute.

When words flap and jab in my chest,
My metered compass is nudged to the line.
My nation is a caterpillar trying to escape
The cocoon of poverty.
I watched with a guttered mouth and flaming eyes.

My cheeks burn as drenched eyes gaze at the sea—
Thousands of paper boats wafting their way westward.
Underwater bodies are turned into vessels,
Laden with conches & bells signaling the wind
To grant passage so we may return with flowers
To our carrion-birthplace.

Dec. 3, 2005

Boulevard Jean Jacques Dessalines

Patrick Sylvain

Again, I've been insulted at the common market.
July, Boulevard Dessalines reeking with human
Sweat, burnt oil and a carnival of shouting vendors.
I captured images onto magnetic tapes.
Frenzied hands tugging used American blue jeans,
Weary feet slipping into used leather shoes.
I shouldered my camera steadily as rivers of sweat
Streamed past beaming yellow eyes.

Jean Jacques Dessalines has gathered his chopped
Remains and remounted his horse. Vexed
By the polluted soil and dingy urchins begging.
Underneath broken storefronts. Dessalines' Boulevard
Is a chaotic heap where hips violently sway
To navigate busied feet that rid of goods so children
Will not go hungry. I zoomed in on frenzied hands,
Grabbing worn foreign goods. I panned and framed
Pouting lips, a desperate buyer noticed my invading lens.
Our misery is a splintered cross with protruding nails.

July, as my memory chokes on dust and filth,
I finally dare to write down what I witnessed
On Jean Jacques Dessalines' Boulevard.
Port-au-Prince has been assassinated,
Cut into wanton pieces waiting to be buried
Underneath a universe of garbage. I can't erase
The carnival of vendors with their cacophonous
Sounds and lurid, nor the fat woman
In a deep purple dress sweating spread-legged,
Wearing a fake gold chain around her thick black neck
As she meticulously places bundles
Of dirty *Gourdes* into her brassiere.

August 2005